

'Star Wars' May Destroy Strategic Defenses

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SURELY no national security issue has had such a brief yet bizarre history as the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Announced on a Presidential whim, the program has in four years become the Administration's No. 1 military priority. Conceived as a way to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete," S.D.I. could instead spur a major increase in offensive weapons. But the greatest irony is that its proponents may be destroying whatever small chance there is that strategic defenses might one day make the world safe from nuclear war.

For both the United States and the Soviet Union, security ultimately rests on the principle of nuclear deterrence. No attacker could ever strike first and escape a crushing retaliatory blow. Whether we planned it that way or not, the fact is that a state of mutual assured destruction — MAD, as it is called — has existed for many years.

Critics of all persuasions have found mutual assured destruction to be unacceptable as a permanent condition. Some yearn for the bygone days of American nuclear superiority; others believe that negotiated reductions are the only way to ease the nuclear threat. But nobody is very happy with the current state of affairs, with each superpower poised to launch more than 10,000 strategic warheads at the other.

The danger is that, over time, the odds of stumbling into nuclear war are simply too great to ignore. Of course, no rational leader would contemplate a first strike in peacetime. But in a moment of tension or crisis, when attack from the other seemed imminent, a leader might overreact to a false alarm or decide that he had nothing to lose by "going first."

As nuclear weapons become swifter and more accurate, and as warning and reaction times shrink, these dangers grow. Mutual assured destruction may still be strong, but the price of its failure is obscenely high.

So if MAD is unacceptable as a permanent condition, what is the alternative?

The President's answer is "Star Wars." While there are serious doubts about the feasibility of S.D.I. lasers, particle beams and other exotic technologies, it is still too soon to know how effective or ineffective it will be. At the same time, nearly everybody agrees that the research — unstoppable, in any case — should continue. After all, even a small hope is worth pursuing.

But the Administration's approach is all wrong. The President's gung-ho program, under which deployment may begin as early as 1993, will create conditions that kill whatever small chance strategic defenses have for success. This is so because such haste ignores common sense criteria for developing successful technologies.

For the Strategic Defense Initiative, these criteria are the following:

Careful research and development.

The Challenger shuttle disaster is evidence of what can happen when politics pushes science too fast. Many more lives are potentially at stake with S.D.I., yet the program is already under intense political pressure, to the detriment of sound scientific judgment.

A cooperative American-Soviet approach.

The Russians fear that the Strategic Defense Initiative is a cover for American efforts to gain strategic superiority. Hence, they will surely pursue techniques to overcome or circumvent it. The S.D.I. director, Lieut. Gen. James A. Abrahamson, recently admitted that we could find ourselves in another arms spiral of "countermeasure and counter-countermeasure." The only way to allay the Russians' fears is by reaffirming existing arms agreements. We must assure the Russians that we are probing new concepts in science, not fielding a weapon against them.

Deep cuts in offensive weapons.

As "Star Wars" supporters have acknowledged, no strategic defense can work in the face of ever-increasing numbers of missiles and warheads. Yet these are exactly what the Soviet Union will build to counter our unrestrained development of S.D.I. Instead, we should be willing to slow the program a bit while working for major reductions in offensive weapons.

If President Reagan is serious about one day replacing mutual as-

sured destruction with a system of strategic defenses, this is the path he must follow. Unfortunately, he appears convinced that any delay will "kill" the Strategic Defense Initiative. This is not so.

As shown in a recent study by the Committee for National Security, modest restraints on S.D.I. would enable this country to take advantage of Soviet offers for deep cuts in offensive weapons. Moreover, these restraints would hardly "kill" the program, but would allow us to investigate thoroughly the long-term feasibility of the most critical new technologies. Such a compromise would basically let America have it both ways.

It will take at least a decade before we can assess the full potential of strategic defenses. In the end, they may not prove out. In either case, deterrence will be with us for a long time to come. But if strategic defenses are ever going to contribute to nuclear stability, it will only be in cooperation with the Russians in a world of drastically reduced offensive arsenals. We cannot ram "Star Wars" down their throats.

Those who push hardest for early deployment are under the illusion that there is a unilateral, technological fix that can protect us from Soviet nuclear weapons. They are wrong. And not only are they the enemies of arms control, they are the Strategic Defense Initiative's worst enemies as well.

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